

ANSEL ADAMS

Howard Bond in Petoskey, 6/27/17, at AACC 9/5/17

Ansel Adams was born in 1902, so whenever I mention a date today, subtract 2 to think of his age. An aftershock of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake threw him to the ground and made his nose crooked. He was told it could be fixed when he grew up, but it never was, so he said “I guess I never grew up”.

Because Ansel was such a precocious and hyperactive child, he didn't fit in any of the elementary schools they tried, so he was home schooled by his father and a tutor, and he became a good writer. After he started playing the piano on his own, his parents got him the first of a series of good teachers and he became very serious about it.

His father inherited a big timber business from HIS father, but it failed and money was a worry for the Adams family thereafter and for Ansel until late in life.

The Panama-Pacific Exposition opened on his 13th birthday and his father, seeing it as an opportunity to unleash his son's great energy, bought him a year's pass. Although he continued his piano lessons and home schooling, he was free to roam the fair part of each day. He spent most of his time at the exhibitions of technology and art, and at daily organ concerts. He even finagled an opportunity to play the organ.

In 1916, the 14 year old Adams persuaded his parents to spend their summer vacation in Yosemite. He recalled their arrival in Yosemite as a defining moment in his life and felt that a deep psychic connection had been made. He visited Yosemite every year for the rest of his life.

His parents gave him a Kodak Brownie on that first trip, which he eagerly used throughout Yosemite valley. Back home, he started hanging out in camera stores and learning all he could about photography. He got a part time job in his neighbor's photofinishing business.

Not wanting to be away from the piano during his summers in Yosemite, he found a piano he could use in the home of Harry Best, who had a gallery in the valley. There, he met his future wife, Virginia Best, who would later inherit her father's gallery. For many years, a small but steady income from it supplemented Ansel's meager earnings.

Until his late 20s, Adams still wanted to be a professional pianist, even as his photography was also becoming very serious. When he met Paul Strand in New Mexico in 1930 and saw some of his negatives, he finally decided that photography would be his career. Strand had been an early adopter of straight photography and his negatives were a revelation to Adams.

SIERRA CLUB

At age 18, Adams was hired to be the summer caretaker of the Sierra Club's Yosemite headquarters, the Le Conte Memorial Lodge. He managed to join parts of the annual Sierra club outing in the high country for the next several years until 1930, when he became leader of the annual outings. He was responsible for choosing routes and camp sites, as well as humorous campfire programs, and he found time to make a few photographs, which began appearing in the Sierra Club Bulletin. By the late 1930s, these huge groups of 200 people and 50 mules were reduced in size to have less impact on the wilderness and propane was substituted for firewood.

Virginia served on the Board of Directors of the Sierra Club for a couple of years until the birth of their son, Michael, in 1935. That year, both she and Ansel were candidates for the board. Each campaigned for the other and she apparently was more effective because he was elected, serving for 37 years. Ansel had already been on the club's editorial board since 1928, where he served for 43 years.

In 1952, largely at Adams' insistence, David Brower who had been the editor of the Sierra Club Bulletin, became the club's first Executive Director. He instituted publishing of the Exhibit Format books and saw membership rise from 10,000 in 1956 to 2.4 million in 2014.

In the 1960s two dams in the Grand Canyon, one in the National Monument and the other in the heart of the National Park, were in a bill being considered by congress,. My family and I floated past these sites in 1966. As soon as the trip was over, I joined the Sierra Club and showed my slides of the trip to about 50 groups in Ann Arbor. The Sierra Club lost its tax exempt status when it ran full page ads against the dams in the New York Times. However, the dams were not built and membership quickly doubled.

For decades, Adams was a friend of each head of the National Park Service and each Secretary of the Interior, and was an influential voice in conservation issues. For example, he sent his 1938 book, "Sierra Nevada, the John Muir Trail" to Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, who gave it to president Roosevelt. With their voices behind the legislation, Kings Canyon was made a national park in 1940.

Over the years, many environmental battles found Ansel at their center. He came to wield political clout as did no other environmentalist. Fluent with photographs, pen, and tongue, he bombarded Washington with telegrams, letters, personal appearances, and phone calls. His commitment lasted a lifetime.

GROUP F64

Fox Talbot, the Englishman who announced his invention of photographs on paper in 1839, was the first of many who wanted to use it to make art. However, some people thought that the product of a camera was too mechanical to be art. Around 1900, photographers with this view worked in a style called Pictorialism, making their images look like other media by using soft focus lenses and hand alterations.

In 1932, a group of friends who believed in making art by means of sharp images that looked photographic had an exhibition at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. For the show, they adopted the symbolic name Group f64, because this very small lens aperture facilitates great depth of field, allowing images to be sharp throughout. The group of 7 included Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, and Imogen Cunningham, and there were several guests, including Edward's son, Brett. After this exhibition, they didn't function much as a group, but they were very influential, helping to

make their style, called Modernism, dominant in art photography for the next 40 years and still relevant today.

In a statement that accompanied the 1932 Group f64 exhibition, Adams said that he had to see the finished photograph in his mind before the shutter was released. This idea later became part of his teaching of the Zone System of exposure and development of negatives, and he called it “previsualization”.

In the 1970s, many university art departments began teaching photography in a style called Post-Modernism, wherein technical excellence was DE-emphasized. A former student of mine has exhibited his outstanding black & white prints at the Ann Arbor art fair for many years. Often, they were seen by present or former students of photography in university art departments where the teachers were Post-Modernists. The students usually expressed their dismay when they realized that they couldn't make prints of that quality because they had learned to **TALK** about photographs, but were not taught how to control their medium.

In one of his books, Adams said “Absent from these pages are statements of what the photographs ‘mean’. I cannot and will not attempt to describe, analyze, or define the creative-emotional motivations of my work or the work of others”. And Brett Weston said “Photography is a visual medium, and the less said, the better.”

PERSONAL PHOTOGRAPHS

As a beginner, Adams made pictures in the Pictorialist style, but soon stopped that. The discipline Adams learned during long hours of piano practice carried over into his photography. He felt that in both endeavors, mastery of technique is necessary to facilitate personal expression, a view not common among Post-Modernists.

He seized every opportunity to make personal photographs when traveling for commercial assignments, which he was forced to do until around age 70. In addition, there were frequent travels that were entirely for photographing the natural scene.

In 1941, Secretary of the Interior Ickes asked Adams to photograph the national parks and monuments and produce murals for the Department of Interior building. Although the war interrupted the project and the murals were never made, he delivered work prints of many photographs made for the project.

In 1943, too old for the army during WW II, but wanting to do something for the war effort, Adams photographed the people of Japanese ancestry who were unconstitutionally imprisoned in a desolate camp at Manzanar, California. Adams' project resulted in a book, "Born Free and Equal", and exhibitions, including one at the NY Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). In spite of this treatment, a battalion of young Japanese-American volunteers became the most decorated unit in American military history. Along with photographing people at Manzanar, Adams made two of his most popular photographs: "Mount Williamson from Manzanar", and "Winter Sunrise from Lone Pine."

Adams received Guggenheim fellowships in 1946 and 1948 to support his photographing and, in 1959, a third one to support printing of his many negatives he had never printed. I once had a little book that showed every picture he made for one of the Guggenheims. Along with a few outstanding photographs, there were plenty of boring ones. This, along with several days I spent going through prints in Brett Weston's vault made me realize that everyone makes lots of boring pictures. The trick is to show only the most interesting ones!

EXHIBITIONS

Adams had hundreds of exhibitions, beginning soon after he got serious about photography, but I'll mention only a few of the most important ones.

He started with a bang with his first solo museum exhibition occurring in January, 1931 at the Smithsonian. 1932 brought a whirlwind of activities: an 80 print solo exhibition in February at the deYoung museum in San Francisco, a show at a San Francisco gallery in June; and the famous Group f64 exhibition in the de Young museum in November and December. The hyperactive child had become a super active adult.

Alfred Stieglitz, through his magazine, “Camera Work”, his NY gallery, and his own photographs, was important in promoting photography as art in the first decades of the 20th century. He was a force behind the Modernist approach espoused by Group f64. In 1936, Adams showed his latest photographs to Stieglitz, who offered him an exhibition. Ansel considered it the greatest moment of his career thus far.

In 1937, Beaumont Newhall invited Adams to supply 6 prints for the NY MOMA’s first major photographic exhibition, “Photography, 1839–1937”. This became the basis for Newhall’s popular history book. Beaumont and Nancy Newhall became very good friends of the Adamses and Nancy wrote his first biography and the text for many of his other books.

More key exhibitions:

1939 and 1949: at the San Francisco MOMA.

1959: his first solo exhibition at the de Young museum since 1932.

In 1963, he had a 539-piece exhibition at the de Young, the largest ever held anywhere by one photographer.

His book, Yosemite and the Range of Light, was a catalog for his first big exhibition at the NY MOMA in 1979. It was unusual to have it in the same city so soon after his show at the Metropolitan Museum in 1974 – no doubt because his fame was then at its highest.

COMMERCIAL JOBS

Adams had the first of countless commercial jobs at age 18 when a neighbor asked him to photograph her kindergarten class. This was before flashbulbs, so he used powdered magnesium, which burns with a big flash. He used way too much and the fire department had to be called. He finished outdoors with natural light.

One of his commercial jobs seen by hordes of people was the making of color transparencies for the huge Kodak Colorama display in Grand Central Station.

After Virginia inherited her father's gallery in 1936, they wanted nice souvenirs for tourists, so Adams chose a number of his photographs to be offered as 8x10 Yosemite Special Edition Series prints. When I bought two in 1967, they were printed and signed by Adams and cost \$12 each! Eventually, Alan Ross started making these little gems under Adams' supervision and he was still printing them 40 years later. You can buy these excellent prints from the Ansel Adams gallery for around \$300.

In 1963, Adams was offered the biggest commercial assignment of his career: photographing all the branches of the University of California system. It took 3 years and 6,000 negatives and resulted in a book.

Bill Turnage became Adams' manager in the 1970s and organized his life. Bill was for a time, manager of Best's Studio in Yosemite before he proposed changing its name to the Ansel Adams Gallery. He suggested that Adams raise his print price to \$500 in 1974. In 1975, he suggested raising the price to \$800 along with an announcement that no orders would be accepted after the end of the year. This move, which was intended to let Adams stop printing the same popular negatives over and over, caused dealers to order thousands of prints, keeping him under pressure for the next several years. After that, his frenetic pace continued with the printing of the Museum set, 75 of his most popular images, which was only available to people who would donate it to a museum. All in all, he had to make some 7,000 prints at ages 76 to 80.

In the 1970s, many universities began teaching photography and there was a collecting boom, aided by the publicity surrounding Adams' most popular photograph, "Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico". Its price went from \$800 in 1975 to \$17,500 by the time Adams delivered the last ones dealers had ordered and its price was being reported in the Wall Street Journal. I give Adams some of the credit for the collecting boom that made it possible for me to drop my other employment and start doing photography as art full time in 1979.

BOOKS and PORTFOLIOS

There were too many books for me to list. The “how-to” books were tremendously helpful to generations of photographers. His countless books of photographs were an important source of income during most of his life and many more have been published posthumously. Calendars and posters still continue to increase the general public’s awareness of his work.

In 1926, when Adams was getting serious about photography, he met Albert Bender, a San Francisco art patron, who saw some of his prints, and suggested a portfolio. The edition of 100 sets was sold easily, many to Bender’s friends. The title, “Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras”, was suggested with the idea that sales would be easier if the word photograph wasn’t mentioned, a choice Adams later regretted.

His next portfolio, 22 years later, was the first in his mature style. He called it Portfolio I, seemingly disavowing the so-called “Parmelian” prints. At \$100 per set, it sold out quickly.

Portfolio II, National Parks and Monuments, 1950. 15 prints in an edition of 105.

For Portfolios III & IV in 1960 and 1963, he had to make 7,228 prints while very busy with commercial work. I remember when these were offered for sale by the Sierra Club at what seemed like remarkably low prices.

Portfolios V and VI, 1970 and 1974 were the first ones containing 16x20 prints and cost considerably more than Portfolios III & IV. To justify the higher prices, he stated that he would not print these negatives again and ran them through a check canceling machine. Not surprisingly, they didn’t include his most popular images.

Portfolio VII, in 1976, contained glorious images. The horizontal version of “Aspens, Northern New Mexico” is my favorite and will be in our house as long as I am. It was on the letterhead of the Sierra Club for many years.

Portfolios II, III, IV, and VII have passed through our house and it was wonderful to be able to enjoy them. Now, we have only a few favorite Adams prints remaining.

TEACHING

In 1940, Adams first taught his Yosemite workshop and resumed it after the war, continuing into his 70s. He also began teaching at the Los Angeles Art Center School.

With Fred Archer (a fellow teacher), he devised the Zone System for exposing and developing negatives, which became very widely used by serious photographers. Along with use of a spot meter to measure small parts of a scene, the Zone System allows planning of some print values before exposing the negative. If a dark part of the scene and a light part are too different in brightness, one can plan less than normal development of the negative to reduce contrast. If they aren't different enough, one can increase contrast by developing longer. Thus, all negatives can have approximately normal contrast. I would hate to have to get along without the Zone System, which I started using and teaching 50 years ago.

In 1967, I attended the two week version of the Ansel Adams Yosemite Workshop. We spent nearly half of the time in classroom sessions and over half photographing in the field with Adams and assistants circulating to offer help. I became slightly frustrated because I ran out of questions while Adams was so accessible.

In the field one day, I noticed Adams, who was a consultant to the Polaroid Corporation, trying to help a tourist whose camera was misbehaving. After sending an assistant to his van to get more Polaroid materials and trying repeatedly to get it to work, he gave up and gave the tourist the address of the Los Angeles Polaroid office. He instructed the man, who apparently didn't know who was helping him, to say “Ansel Adams sent me”. My guess is that he was given a new camera.

Many people in the workshop were photographing their subjects on peel-apart Polaroid material before doing it with regular film. With several assistants available for a chore of this sort, I was impressed when Adams made the rounds with a canvas bag, collecting people's Polaroid trash.

Also in the field, I overheard a participant, who was clearly a novice, ask Adams a shockingly elementary question. I was greatly impressed by his earnest and respectful answer, and thought it would have been a good example for any teacher.

We were invited to send prints afterward for critique. Adams returned my 17 prints with 3 hand-typed, single-spaced pages of comments. What a lot of work, especially if a large fraction of the 64 people in the workshop sent him prints!

In 1970 & 1972, I attended two workshops in Carmel that included printing demonstrations in Adams' darkroom and he used my negatives both times. As he read one of them with his new densitometer, one of the first with digital readout, someone asked if he could get along without it. He said "Oh yes, I could go to my neighbor's house and use his."

At the 1972 workshop, Imogen Cunningham was one of the teachers. She was born in 1883 and to her, Adams had been a young upstart in Group f64 days. The students were amused by her conspicuous lack of awe for him. I had tea with her after we finished photographing on Cannery Row, but that was my only time with her. Afterward, I bought her portrait of Stieglitz, which she printed and signed when she was nearing 90.

After having attending the 3 workshops, each time I was in California during the rest of the 1970s, I would call Adams and ask if he would like to look at my latest prints. He always said "Come over at 5:00", which was his cocktail hour. It was only later that I learned of his physical ailments and his tremendous load of darkroom work when he graciously spent time with me. On these occasions, I would spend the day with Brett Weston, going through prints in his vault or photographing together before going to Adams' house. One time, Virginia invited me to stay to dinner and I was VERY sorry to have to decline because I had already arranged to go to dinner with Brett.

HERE ARE A FEW OF THE THINGS ADAMS STARTED:

In 1940, he had a major role in establishing the photography department at the NY MOMA and served as vice-chairman of the photography committee.

In 1952, Aperture magazine, devoted to photography as art, was started by Adams, the Newhalls, Minor White, and Dorothea Lange.

Adams caused the University of Arizona to establish a Center for Creative Photography in order to receive his archive of prints, negatives, books, correspondence, etc. Subsequently, some 200 other photographers have placed their archives there and they also have some of my prints.

1967, Adams was the key figure in starting the Friends of Photography, a national organization to promote photography as a fine art. Initially, he was president and Brett Weston was vice president. It grew to 15,000 members and had active workshop and exhibition programs. Most members appreciated the Modernist style that Adams practiced. After he was dead, a man who promoted Post-Modernism was put in charge and the organization folded.

In 1979, when his fame was at its peak, Adams was the first photographer on the cover of Time magazine. His name and photographs are now more widely known than any other American photographer and he probably contributed more to the present acceptance of photography as art than any other individual.

MORE ABOUT ANSEL

Adams was always the life of any party, with his jokes and shenanigans at the piano. For decades, he organized a big Christmas entertainment at the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite Valley.

Morley Baer, a bearded photographer who helped Adams teach his Yosemite workshops, was having breakfast one morning at a large table in the Ahwahnee, surrounded by students. Ansel and Virginia were sitting at a little table by themselves when a tourist came along, wanting to take a picture of the famous photographer. To get in the best position for

photographing Morley, the tourist asked the old couple to move. Chuckling to themselves, Ansel and Virginia moved out of his way.

Adams knew presidents Ford and Carter, and he made the latter's official portrait, the first that was a photograph. At Reagan's request, Ansel met with him, but was unable to interest him in conservation.

Mary Alinder, who had degrees in English and nursing, was a friend of Adams for many years and worked for him in his last years, helping with his long delayed autobiography and providing some nursing care. During their walks, she captured his reminiscences on tape and, as practically a member of the household, was in a unique position to write her book, "Ansel Adams, a Biography". It contains detail no other biographer could know. For his 80th birthday celebration, she arranged for the great Russian pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy to play a recital at the Adams residence. Ashkenazy was afraid he would destroy Ansel's old piano, so she rented a Steinway and he came two days early to practice. Her fear that his fee would be too much for her was laid to rest when he said the only payment he wanted was some caviar. After the thrilling concert, and after Ashkenazy ate the **whole kilo** of caviar, Ansel invited him to choose two prints.

Alinder writes, quote, "When students showed him prints, Adams, with great dignity, focussed his entire attention on what the student was showing him. He never put people down, but was always supportive and positive . . . he cared deeply about others".

Early in 1984, I told him I was planning a trip to photograph on the Greek Islands.

He sent me a card on which he said "I am really envious of your forthcoming Greek trip! At 82 I have certain limitations but I'm sure you will do them proud."

Just as I was about to start my trip, Vladimir Ashkenazy again gave a recital at the Adams home. However, Ansel entered the hospital a couple of days before and had to miss it. He died that evening.

Soon, the Ansel Adams Wilderness was set aside adjoining Yosemite National Park. A mountain on Yosemite's boundary was officially named Mt. Ansel Adams and his son, Michael, placed his ashes at the top.

Like Adams, it was hard for me to choose between careers in music or photography so I did both, one after the other. Near the end of high school and through college, I worked part time for a portrait and wedding photographer. Seeing the kind of life my boss led, I chose music.

After 5 exciting and exhausting years as a high school band director, I started learning all I could about photography and had a very satisfying 35 year career. I used conventional materials to make photographs as art and had the pleasure of making many friends from among the 2,500 people who attended my workshops.

I'm greatly indebted to Adams, who taught me so much, through his books, workshops, personal interactions, and by example.